

Message Text

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SUBJ: MINES AND RAILS: A STRIKE PROFILE

REF: (A) TUNIS 9128, (B) TUNIS 9146, (C) TUNIS 9156

SUMMARY: TWO SIGNIFICANT LABOR-MANAGEMENT DISPUTES ARE NOW UNFOLDING; ONE IN THE CRITICAL EXPORT INDUSTRY OF PHOSPHATE PRODUCTION, THE OTHER IN TUNISIA'S RAIL NETWORK. WHILE THEY ARE BEING ARGUED IN ECONOMIC TERMS, BOTH ARE VIEWED LARGELY THROUGH A POLITICAL PRISM. WORKER DEMANDS, LEGITIMATE AND OTHERWISE, INDEED DEFINE MANY ROOTS OF THESE CONFLICTS. HOWEVER, LARGE SECTORS OF PUTOWV OPINION CONSIDER THEM IMPLICIT TESTS OF STRENGTH BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND UNION AUTHORITIES.

1. MINES: 13,000 PHOSPHATE MINERS IN THE GAFSA REGION OF SOUTHERN TUNISIA LAUNCHED A THREE-DAY WARNING STRIKE ON DEC 8, 1977. NO VIOLENCE OR OTHER DISCIPLINARY BREACH WAS REPORTED. WORKER DEMANDS INCLUDED TWENTY PERCENT PROFIT SHARING, A "THIRTEENTH MONTH" BONUS, ONE MONTH'S PAIDLANNUAL LEAVE, AN INCREASE IN HOUSING ALLOW-
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ANCES, AND IMPROVEMENT IN WHAT THE MINERS FEDERATION CHARACTERIZED AS "DEPLORABLE SOCIAL CONDITIONS" OF THE MINING CAMPS. THIS DEMAND INCLUDED FURNISHING OF FRESH WATER AND ELECTRICITY TO MINERS' DWELLINGS. GOVERNMENT NEGOTIATORS REPLIED THAT THE PROPOSED ECONOMIC PACKAGE WOULD COST AROUND TWELVE MILLION DOLLARS (EQUIVALENT), THAT CURRENT WORLD PRICES FOR PHOSPHATES ARE SEVERELY DEPRESSED, AND THAT THE PHOSPHATE MINES RETURNED ONLY ONE-HALF

MILLION DOLLARS (EQUIVALENT) BEFORE TAXES IN 1976. THE MINERS HAVE RETURNED TO WORK; HOWEVER NEGOTIATIONS ARE AT AN IMPASSE. THE TUNISIAN GENERAL WORKERS' CONFEDERATION (UGTT) HAS CALLED A FOLLOW-UP MINERS' STRIKE, FOR INDEFINITE DURATION, TO BEGIN FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30. FOUR DAYS LATER (JANUARY 3, 1978) ALL WORKERS OF THE GAFSA REGION IN PUBLIC-SECTOR EMPLOYMENT ARE SCHEDULED TO JOIN THE MINERS IN A GENERAL SOLIDARITY STRIKE.

2. RAILS: ON DECEMBER 19, 1977 SEVEN THOUSAND RAILWAY WORKERS UNLEASHED A TWENTY-FOUR HOUR WARNING STRIKE AFTER SUCCESSIVE FAILURES IN NEGOTIATIONS AND CONCILIATION BETWEEN THE PARTIES. IN ORDER OF ECONOMIC IMPACT, THE RAILWORKERS' FEDERATION DEMANDED (A) REVISION OF SALARY SCALES; (B) HOUSING ALLOWANCES; (C) PROFIT SHARING; (D) SENIORITY BONUSES (UNCHANGED SINCE 1947); AND VARIOUS OTHER ADJUSTMENTS SUCH AS RISK, MILEAGE, AND NIGHT-SHIFT PREMIUMS. THE UNION ITSELF ESTIMATED THE PACKAGE AT 9.7 MILLION DOLLARS (EQUIVALENT) AND SAID THAT MANY OF ITS ELEMENTS HAD BEEN NEGLECTED BY MANAGEMENT FOR DECADES. THE RAILROAD ASSOCIATION REPLIED THAT THE FINANCIAL SITUATION OF ITS CONSTITUENT LINES PERMITTED NO ADJUSTMENTS, THAT THE RAILWAY WORKERS HAD ALREADY RECEIVED A RAISE (I.E. A COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENT PROVIDED BY THE SOCIAL PACT OF JANUARY 1977), AND THAT ITS WORKERS ENJOYED FREE TRANSPORTATION OVER MEMBER LINES. THIS DISPUTE REMAINS UNSOLVED. THE RAIL WORKERS ARE SCHEDULED TO RETURN ON THREE-DAY WARNING STRIKE JANUARY 2.

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3. STRATEGIES AND REACTION: BOTH LABOR FEDERATIONS, MINE AND RAIL, MET JOINTLY ON DECEMBER 20 AT UGTT HEADQUARTERS TO MAP OUT A COMMON STRATEGY. THEY LEFT THIS STRATEGY AS YET UNDEFINED OUTSIDE OF UNION COUN-

CILS. THE UGTT IS RUMORED TO BE STAGING A MASSIVE DEMONSTRATION IN SUPPORT OF THE MINERS AND RAIL WORKERS NEXT FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30. THE GOVERNMENT, AFTER A MONTH-LONG MEDIA CAMPAIGN AGAINST "THOSE FORCES WORKING TO UNDERMINE NATIONAL UNITY," SUDDENTLY SHIFTED TACTICS. ON DECEMBER 20 MOHAMED SAYAH, THE DIRECTOR OF THE DESTOURIAN SOCIALIST PARTY (PSD), IN AN ADDRESS BEFORE AN ASSEMBLY OF LOCAL GOVERNORS, CHARACTERIZED THE RECENT WAVE OF STRIKES AS "PROOF OF THE SUCCESS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S INDUSTRIALIZATION POLICY." THE FOLLOWING DAY, THE BANNER EDITORIAL OF THE PARTY ORGAN L' ACTION (ENTITLED "APPRENTICESHIP OF DEMOCRACY") ECHOED THIS NEW LINE. HOWEVER, THE RECENT CABINET SHAKE-UPS (SEE RETOTPOLN WHICH BOTH DISLODGED A MINISTER (BELKHODJA) CONSIDERED RELATIVELY SYMPATHETIC TO THE UGTT AND SEPARATED INDUSTRY, MINES AND ENERGY FROM THE FORMER ECONOMICS MINISTRY, CERTAINLY SIGNAL YET ANOTHER CHANGE OF COURSE IN THE TROUBLED GOVERNMENT/UNION RELATIONSHIP.

4. COMMENT: ONE SALIENT POINT IS THAT TUNISIA'S MULTI-STAGE

STRIKE SYSTEM CONSTITUTES A SEVERE TEST OF INTERNAL DISCIPLINE AND LEADERSHIP FOR THE UNION. IN FACT, THERE HAVE BEEN NUMEROUS EXAMPLES OF WILDCATting AGAINST THE WILL OF UGTT LEADERSHIP, WHICH HAS GENERALLY SOUGHT TO ORCHESTRATE STRIKES FROM TUNIS AND TO LIMIT THEIR DURATION TO SPECIFIC "WARNING" PERIODS OF ONE OR TWO DAYS BEFORE AUTHORIZING "INDEFINITE" STRIKES. ANOTHER KEY IS THAT WHILE MUCH OF THE RHETORIC IS ECONOMIC AND LABOR-ORIENTED, THE DRAMA BEING PLAYED IS A BYZANTINE MIX OF PERSONALITY CLASH, POWER STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSION POLITICS BOTH WITHIN THE UNION AND WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF AS WELL AS BETWEEN THE TWO. THIS REPORT DERIVES FROM FRENCH AND ARABIC PRESS ACCOUNTS, TUNISIAN AND FOREIGN, AS WELL AS PERSONAL DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN EMBASSY OFFICERS AND UGTT OFFICIALS.

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